

# Los Angeles Times

## State's school districts prepare for cuts, layoffs

**Austerity measures may not be enough, officials say.**

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A clearer -- and more ominous -- picture emerged Monday of school districts' struggles to balance their budgets in preparation for a potential \$4.8-billion state funding shortfall.

Districts around the state met two deadlines Monday: They were required to notify employees of possible layoffs and they had to report their financial data to county offices of education.

The California Department of Education estimated that nearly 20,000 employees received early termination notices, with at least one district -- Placentia Yorba-Linda Unified -- offering a \$1,000 bonus to employees who retire or resign by April 1. At least 14 Los Angeles-area school districts reported that they might not be able to avoid running a deficit over the next two years.

"We've never had that many" with potential deficits, said Ken Shelton, assistant superintendent for business services for the Los Angeles County Office of Education. "While some districts may have fiscal challenges irrespective of the governor's budget, certainly the current budget proposal exacerbates the problem."

In recent weeks, school boards have moved to increase class sizes in some primary grades and some have even voted to close schools. Conejo Valley Unified in Ventura County is expected to consider closing two campuses today.

Educators have been preparing to cut costs since Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his budget, which proposes \$4.8 billion in education cuts this year and next. It's the biggest education reduction in memory, school officials say.

Los Angeles Unified, the largest district in the state, is facing a projected \$460-million deficit next year. Because of the financial uncertainty, the Board of Education voted to submit a "qualified" interim financial report to the county, which means that the district may not be able to meet its obligations over the next two years.

L.A. Unified decided not to issue layoff notices to any permanent teachers, guaranteeing that they will return next year.

"We gave it a lot of thought and decided, 'Why worry them unnecessarily?' " said Roger Buschmann, the district's chief human resources officer.

But the district could lay off its nearly 6,500 probationary teachers without early notices and it could also decide not to replace about 2,000 teachers for the upcoming year, Buschmann said.

The probationary teachers and retirees represent about a quarter of the district's teaching staff, said Buschmann, who quickly added that the scenario was unlikely.

"We won't be doing anything that drastic," he said.

It's unclear how much money in teachers' salaries the district would save with those moves.

A new, credentialed teacher costs the district about \$66,000 annually in salary and benefits.

Although no L.A. Unified teachers were notified, about 3,000 administrators and senior management contract employees, including Buschmann, were warned that they may not return next year.

The teachers union will fight for probationary teachers, said Joshua Pechthalt, a teachers union vice president, who added that district cannot afford to lose any employees.

"We're not happy administrators are getting noticed," he said. "We're concerned overall."

The district has also studied increasing class sizes in kindergarten through third grade from 20 students per teacher to 23, which could save about \$92 million, Buschmann said. Because the 20-1 ratio is a state law, changing it would require a waiver from the state and the board hasn't considered the move.

But the 6,800-student Whittier City School District board has already moved to boost class size, voting to drop classroom limits for third-graders.

The move will save Whittier about \$110,000, district officials said.

The district has a budget of about \$56 million and is facing a \$2.5-million shortfall next year.

School board President Efrain Aceves said there has been very little backlash against the move so far, probably because parents are upset that the district is also considering closing an elementary school because of its budget crisis.

"When the realization sets in that . . . people are going to be affected by class size, people

will become more involved," Aceves said.

Even if the Whittier district closes the school while also raising third-grade class sizes, administrators would still need to find almost \$1 million more to balance the books, Aceves said.

"We do not have a magic bullet," he said.

Parents and educators throughout the state have organized letter-writing campaigns and demonstrations to persuade legislators to restore education funding.

Barbara Schwartz moved to Oak Park in Ventura County because of the highly regarded school system.

But the district projects a nearly \$2-million shortfall next year and has notified about 40 teachers, about a fifth of their instructors, that they might lose their jobs.

Schwartz said her son, Eric, a freshman at Oak Park High School, has been inspired by his science teacher.

"He doesn't say that about everyone," she said.

"To think that he might be in a larger class. . . . How are you going to get the attention you may need?"

"It's very depressing," she said.

Fidel Vega, an eighth-grader at Sycamore Junior High School in Anaheim, wrote to the governor to protest the education cuts.

She doubled her 0.67 grade-point average this year because of the efforts of her instructors, some of whom may not return next year.

"I want you to know that I am not only upset because of what these teachers have done for me, but what they would of done for my brothers and sisters that will be coming to Sycamore in the years to come," she wrote.